

Book Review

METHODOLOGY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF RAMAKRISHNA MUKHERJEE

P. N. MUKHERJI (Sage Publications, New Delhi - 2000)

Reviewed by: S. T. Hettige

This is an excellent collection of essays edited by P.N. Mukherji and brings together a number of important contributions by eminent social scientists. In this sense, it is not just another publication on research methods. In fact, the title of the publication does not do justice to its content, which represents a wide-ranging discussion on the development of social sciences, the nature of social science, philosophy of science and various conceptual and methodological approaches in social science research.

Most publications on social science research methodology do not go beyond a description of the various methods and techniques of data collection and analysis. In such publications, often no attempt is made to show the inextricable link between theory building and empirical research. By contrast, the present collection of essays concentrates heavily on philosophy and the nature of social science and demonstrates in no uncertain terms the importance of being conscious of the nature of the process of knowledge production as it has unfolded over the years and how it has shaped our understanding of social phenomena at different levels.

P. N. Mukherji's introduction to the collection of essays is very comprehensive and provides an excellent overview of the major paradigms in social science, quantitative and qualitative research and participatory research methodology. It also includes a detailed discussion of philosophy, theory and epistemology of social science. The latter is perhaps the most important part of the essay as it helps the reader to understand the wider context of social science research which is often

left out in most publications on research methodology. This introduction is so self-contained that it can stand on its own even without the essays by other authors, that follow. It can constitute an integral part of any introductory course on research methodology. It should be made mandatory reading for young researchers who intend to undertake research in the social sciences.

The introduction to the collection is followed by nine essays by well-established social scientists, many of them from India. The bias towards Indian authors is understandable given the fact that the book is published in honour of Ramakrishna Mukherjee, a great Indian social scientist himself. Further, the dominant presence of Indian social scientists in the book is fitting in view of the widespread disenchantment in the region and elsewhere, with the western dominance in knowledge production and dissemination, particularly in the social sciences. Several articles in the Volume give expression to this concern, particularly the essays by T.K. Oommen and Claude Meillassoux.

Immanuel Wallerstein's essay entitled "For Science, Against Scientism: The Dilemmas of Contemporary Knowledge Production" points to the critical issues in scientific knowledge production in general, and knowledge production in social science in particular. It helps the reader to critically look at widely held assumptions and develop a degree of healthy scepticism towards institutions and communities of experts engaged in knowledge production. In other words, Wallerstein is not against science, but sceptical towards what he calls scientism, the claim that "science is disinterested and extra-social and that its truth claims are self-sustaining without reference to more general philosophical assertions, and that science represents the only legitimate mode of knowledge" (P91) The powerful message that emanates from this essay is the need for scientists, in particular the social scientist, to be self-aware and self-critical rather than constantly adopt a defensive posture towards their critics.

In his essay on "Changing Modes of Conceptualising the World: Implications for Social Research", T. K. Oommen points out that some of the methodological issues and problems are related to, among other

things, the manner in which the world is conceptualised. It is this latter issue that he concentrates on, in his essay. He demonstrates how the manner in which the world is conceptualised has changed over the years, and has influenced our “understanding” of the world. He argues that the dominant conceptualisations have originated in certain dominant centres or regions of the world and have influenced research and knowledge production in social sciences elsewhere. However, he does not lump all regions outside the dominant regions together, but distinguishes the main differences between them and their influence on social science theorizing in each of the regions. The main regional configurations he identifies are, Latin America, Africa and Asia. The development of social science has not followed identical paths in these different regions, due to diverse conditions prevailing there. For instance, he argues that, the emergence of a social science rooted in the Indian civilization and/or nations was prevented by the absence of a civilization integrity and the denial of cultural autonomy for India’s nations. The result is that dominant conceptualisations, in spite of their serious drawbacks and even misrepresentations, continue to shape social science thinking and research. The same applies to the notion of “world” currently dominant in the global public discourse.

The purpose of the present review has not been to look at each and every contribution included in the volume. So I do not wish to take up each of the other articles in the volume for discussion, except to say that they have dealt with important aspects of social science research and have contributed to a deeper understanding of the subject. The last contribution by Mukherji and Senguptha which is a wide ranging interview with Ramakrishna Mukherjee is a good way to bring the volume to a close as it demonstrates, in the light of the work and ideas of the latter, how important it is to bear in mind the strong connection between conceptualisation and empirical research in the social sciences. It is the judicious balance that research maintains between the two that leads to the development of grounded theory, which is critical for understanding social reality.